

Challenges and Approaches to Meeting Water Quality Standards

Study Request

In March 2013 the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee directed us to evaluate opportunities to optimize water quality programs. Specifically, the chairs of the three Senate and House resources and environment committees, who requested this evaluation, wanted to understand the challenges in determining appropriate water quality standards and implementing a program for the trading of pollutant reductions in Idaho.

Water Quality

Congress enacted the Clean Water Act in 1972 to establish the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and to regulate quality standards for surface waters. The Clean Water Act establishes two sets of water quality regulations: pollutant discharge limitations and water quality standards.

In Idaho, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) implements pollutant limitations by issuing discharge permits, and the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality establishes water quality standards within the framework of the Clean Water Act. Water quality standards define the goals for state water resources by designating their uses and setting criteria to protect those designated uses. The standards are subject to EPA review and approval and can serve as the basis for pollutant limitations.

The Environmental Protection Agency, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, and local stakeholders play a role in establishing, implementing, and complying with water quality programs in Idaho. The coordination of these groups is instrumental for ensuring that Idaho's water quality standards are met and stakeholder interests are considered.

Evaluation

This evaluation will examine what challenges Idaho stakeholders face in addressing water quality standards. The evaluation will answer the following questions:

- How are designated uses for surface water resources determined and revised?
- When revising water quality standards, how are use-attainability analyses (UAAs) developed and what is the approval process?
- What conditions are necessary to establish sustainable water pollutant trading programs in Idaho?
- How would water pollutant trading programs affect Idaho stakeholders?

Projected completion date: January 2014